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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HOSTS ROUNDTABLE ON "TOWARDS ANNAPOLIS AND BEYOND" WITH MAJOR ISRAELI ACADEMICS AND THINK TANKS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 14th Ambassador Jones held a round-table discussion with leading Israeli academics and think tank representatives to discuss the upcoming Annapolis conference. Opinions varied as to the possible outcomes of the conference, but there was general agreement that planning for the twelve months "after Annapolis" would be critical and that even small achievements from negotiations would constitute progress in ending the protracted Israeli-Arab conflict. Attendees attached significance to Saudi Arabia participation, encouraged inclusion of Syria, and suggested finding a role for Russia. Lastly, most participants felt that progress on the Palestinian issue would make it easier for key regional countries to work with the U.S. to find a solution to the regional challenge posed by Iran. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On November 14th at the Sheraton Hotel in Tel Aviv, Ambassador Jones hosted a roundtable discussion with leading Israeli academics and think tank representatives, including: Mr. Yossi Alpher, Political Security Domain; Prof. Amatzia Baram, Director, Ezri Center for Gulf Studies, U. of Haifa; Prof. Ofra Bengio, Iraq Desk, Dayan Center for M.E. Studies, Tel Aviv University (TAU); Dr. Boaz Ganor, Director, Inst. for Counterterrorism, IDC Herzliya; Efraim Halevy, Director, Center for Strategic Studies, Hebrew U.; Prof. Yair Hirschfeld, Dept. of M.E. Studies, U. of Haifa; Director, ECF; Dr. Emily Laudau, Arms Control and Regional Security Project, INNS (TAU); Prof. Elie Podeh, Chair, M.E. & Islamic Studies Dept., Hebrew U.; Prof. Barry Rubin, Director, GLORIA Center, IDC Herzliya; Dr. Dan Schueftan, Acting Dir., Nat. Security Studies Cent., U. of Haifa; Dr. Brenda Shaffer, Director, Inst. for Adv. Energy Studies, U. of Haifa; Prof. Shimon Shamir, Emeritus Prof., M.E. History Dept., TAU; Prof. Gerald Steinberg, Chair, Political Science Dept., Bar-Ilan U.

Skepticism about Palestinian & Israeli Leaders

¶3. (SBU) Many of the experts expressed concern over the relative political weakness of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas. Yossi Alpher argued that the Fatah Party has yet to be reformed, and, consequently, President Abbas lacks the "political infrastructure in the West Bank to sustain a process." Efraim Halevy, too, said he could not envision an optimistic outcome without doing something about the West Bank/Gaza split. Elie Podeh argued that the Palestinian track was deadlocked, and Abbas needed to overcome the schism in Palestinian politics before coming to the negotiating table. "You cannot ignore Gaza," Halevy added, warning that a split in Hamas could leave Gaza "a no-man's land ruled by warlords." Dealing with the "lesser Devil" (i.e., Hamas) might be preferable to confronting Al-Qaeda in Gaza if the situation becomes anarchic, in his view.

¶4. (SBU) As for Olmert, some expressed concern that his coalition government lacks sufficient stability to survive Annapolis. Boaz Ganor claimed "there is no popular support to promote or implement whatever is agreed at Annapolis." Others worried that politicians

both inside and outside the coalition would move to dissolve the government and call for early elections in 2008. Yossi Alpher said that the Israeli system of governance is structurally incompatible with the needs of peacemaking between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Expectations of Annapolis

15. (SBU) Ephraim Halevy argued that Annapolis will be a success because all who are going have decided that it will be so. Elie Podeh countered that success was in the eye of the beholder, and Hamas was waiting to pounce on the failure they anticipate. Dan Schueftan, an inveterate skeptic, commented that Annapolis would create "false hope (on the Israeli-Palestinian track,)" but this would still be useful as it would help galvanize a coalition against Iran, and enable Israel to return to unilateralism under the "charade of agreement" and the "pretense of responsibility from President Abbas." Schueftan specified that Israel had an overriding interest in removing settlements from the West Bank as soon as possible, while retaining the IDF presence until security improved.

After Annapolis

16. (SBU) Several participants felt that developing the West Bank's economy and economic infrastructure should be the first priority after Annapolis. Ambassador Jones noted that economic development is a necessary but not sufficient condition for peace and that the Palestinians need a political horizon for a two-state solution. Boaz Ganor argued that the West Bank should be transformed into a sort of "Hong Kong" to contrast with the "hell in Gaza." Others

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disagreed with the analogy, noting that the West Bank is landlocked, economic prosperity is impossible to create in only twelve months and that political stability must precede private investment.

17. (SBU) Professor Shamir emphasized the importance of starting a process that continues after Annapolis leading to changes on the ground. Recalling the failures of Oslo and Camp David (2000), Shamir assessed that gaps between the parties had narrowed on a number of issues: A two-state solution is acceptable to most Israelis and Palestinians. "Israelis are more flexible on Jerusalem, and Palestinians are more practical on the 'Right of Return.'" Moreover, Shamir remarked that there are now many resources and plans that the parties are able to draw from as they move head. He compared the protracted Middle East conflict to Northern Ireland, and stressed that even if Annapolis yields just small improvements, it will have been worthwhile. Gerald Steinberg concurred that "with so many obstacles, small steps are necessary."

SYRIA

18. (SBU) Yossi Alpher argued that Syria offered "a better option" and recommended using Annapolis to launch negotiations with Syria. Elie Podeh agreed that it was a mistake to concentrate solely on the Palestinian track, but Amatzia Baram countered that Israel simply could not negotiate two tracks simultaneously.

Creating Coalition of "Core States"

19. (SBU) Several participants noted that progress between Israelis and Palestinians would make it easier for key regional players to cooperate with the U.S. on Iran policy (notably, Egypt and Saudi Arabia). Steinberg argued that Saudi participation in Annapolis would signify (the possibility of) the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Another participant said that Palestinian President Abbas is a partner for building a regional

coalition, albeit a "difficult, bumpy and complicated coalition."
Podeh cautioned against using the term "moderate leaders," a term
that plays to radicals and fundamentalists, and suggested an
alternative nomenclature: "Core State Coalition Alliance." Finally,
a number of participants agreed that Russia should be given a role
in the Annapolis meeting and follow-up before "it found a role for
itself."

JONES